

Core Competencies for Paraeducators



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Acknowledgements

The authors would particularly like to thank the following people whose tireless and sustained efforts made this document possible.

Don Bell, Douglas County Schools
Christine Bratko, Assistant Professor, Community College of Denver
Dorothy Burke, Executive Director, Colorado Classified School Employees Association
Sue Chandler, Colorado Department of Education
Ritu Chopra, Assistant Director, Par²a Center, University of Colorado at Denver
Gayle Fraas, Vice-President (1997-1999), President (1999-2000) School Paraeducator Association of Colorado; Paraeducator, Fort Morgan Public Schools
Ellaline Francis, Secretary (1997-1999), Vice-President (1999-2000), President (2000-2002) School Paraeducator Association of Colorado; Paraeducator, Adams 12 Public Schools
Nancy French, Director, Par²a Center, University of Colorado at Denver
Bernadette Jiron, President, Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals
Mike Nieslanik, Director of Special Education, Cañon City Public Schools
Bonnie Soman, Assistant Director Special Education, Aurora Public Schools
S. Sue Stuska, Director, Early Childhood Program, Front Range Community College
Julie Weimer, President (1997-1999) School Paraeducator Association of Colorado; Paraeducator, Fort Morgan Public Schools

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of:

Retha Fordyce Morris, Former President, Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals
Lorrie Harkness, Director of Special Education, Colorado Department of Education
Lucia Hasty, Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind
Thora Jo Murphy, Front Range Community College
Roger Piwowarski, Assistant Director of Special Education, Aurora Public Schools
Wanda Robinson, Paraeducator
Jane Russell-Miller, Parent
Sue Wiles, Paraeducator

In addition, the Committee acknowledges and appreciates the advice, guidance and inspiration of Anna Lou Pickett, Director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, and a pioneer in the field.

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Core Competencies for Paraeducators

In order to be an effective participant on the education team, to provide quality services to students, and to advance professionally, a paraeducator must acquire and maintain certain essential skills. In this document, such skills are called core competencies and are subdivided into the four domains of: Professionalism and Ethical Practice, Instructional Content and Practice, Supporting the Learning Environment, and Communication and Collaborative Partnerships.



- **Professionalism and Ethical Practice**

Most professions are guided by a set of ethical and professional standards, whether or not formally codified, to which its practitioners adhere. For example, educators are expected to demonstrate characteristics such as honesty, integrity, dependability, cooperation, accountability, and a willingness to learn. They are to treat students with dignity and information with confidentiality. Further, they are expected to consider student welfare as paramount, to engage in activities that enhance student outcomes, and to help protect students from disparagement, exclusion, discrimination, and invasion of privacy. They should be committed to their own professional and personal development and the improvement of their profession.

Paraeducators face these same expectations. Additionally, they are expected to:

- ✓ help to see that the best interest of all learners are met;
- ✓ accept assigned duties and responsibilities;
- ✓ engage only in instructional and non-instructional activities for which they are qualified and trained;
- ✓ assist educators in maintaining supportive learning environments;
- ✓ maintain good relationships with students, families, colleagues, and supervisors;
- ✓ refer concerns expressed by families, learners, or others to their supervisor and/or the collaborative education team; and,
- ✓ maintain confidentiality about all information concerning learners and their families.

Each of the core competencies within this domain was selected because it is requisite to the paraeducator's successful performance and her/his growth as a professional.

Minimum Competencies

- **Serves as a positive role model**

Paraeducators are important in the lives of students, in the school, and in the community. They are viewed as representatives of their school and their profession so it is essential that they present themselves professionally. For students, the paraeducator is often a person to whom they grow quite close and by whom they are greatly influenced. Paraeducators recognize and honor this by engaging in positive behaviors at all times, treating students and colleagues with dignity, and showing regard for individual differences and diversity. As a positive role model, the paraeducator understands her/his own skills, abilities, attitudes, capacities, and needs. S/he displays self-esteem, is aware of her/his impact on others, is self-motivated and self-directed.

- **Demonstrates proficiency in academic skills including oral and written communication**

Communication is a key component of the paraeducator's role. S/he has reason every day to communicate with teachers, supervisors, administrators and other members of the education team. Often these communications are oral, but in some cases information needs to be provided in writing. Additionally, paraeducators communicate with students and their families. It is essential that a paraeducator be proficient in oral and written language in order to communicate information clearly, efficiently, and effectively.

All paraeducators need to have and demonstrate basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics in order to support students' learning needs. Higher levels of academic proficiency may be required contingent upon her/his responsibilities. For example, paraeducators may also be involved in direct instruction of students in a variety of academic areas including math, reading, social studies, and science. In these cases, it is important that a paraeducator has a full understanding of the content to be taught.

- **Demonstrates a positive regard for the distinctions among roles and responsibilities of all members of the education team, including families.**

Generally, licensed personnel supervise and direct paraeducators so, frequently, it may be difficult for the paraeducator to see herself as an equal partner on the education team. Each paraeducator should understand her/his role in relation to other members of the team, participate in the team's processes for decision-making and problem solving, share ideas and viewpoints, and value and respect the perspectives of others. A paraeducator is often a point of contact for families; it is important, therefore, that the paraeducator be aware of the team's policies around communicating with parents.

- **Demonstrates an understanding of employment policies and procedures related to the paraeducator's position.**

Each administrative unit, local district, or facility may differ in its policies and procedures regarding paraeducators. Even within districts, policies and procedures at the building level may vary from one school to the next. It is incumbent upon the paraeducator to gain a thorough understanding of all such policies and procedures. The supervisor should provide guidance in this area.

- **Practices within the context of written standards and policies of the school or agency.**

Most administrative units, local school districts, or other facilities have in place a set of written policies which guide its employees in such issues as confidentiality of records, reporting suspected child abuse, use of school/district property, liability, discipline and so on. It is important that paraeducators be well acquainted with such policies and understand their implementation, purpose, and intent.

Other district/building practices, which may not be in written form, are equally important to the paraeducator. For example, s/he should be aware of the procedures to be followed if s/he suspects a student of being involved in illegal activity in or out-of school, if s/he wants to discuss student progress with the family, if there are concerns about a student's health, or other such sensitive issues.

- **Demonstrates standards of professional performance.**

As professionals and as responsible employees, paraeducators are expected to adhere to such tenets of professional performance as dependability, integrity, cooperation, and flexibility. It is important that paraeducators exercise good judgment as members of the educational team and as school employees. Expectations of the paraeducator may vary depending on the licensed educator with whom s/he works and the relationships among the paraeducator and other members of the educational team. Nevertheless, certain standards will always be in place.

While it is important to note that regular attendance, punctuality, concentration, and attention to detail are expected of all professionals, there are other aspects of professionalism that may not be as clearly defined. Paraeducators need to display optimism in approaching and completing tasks, enthusiasm, perseverance, and excellence.

Recommended Practice

In addition to the minimum competencies described above, there are other competencies that paraeducators should acquire and maintain as they become more experienced and as they have additional opportunities for professional growth.

- **Participates in ongoing professional development congruent with personal growth and skills.**

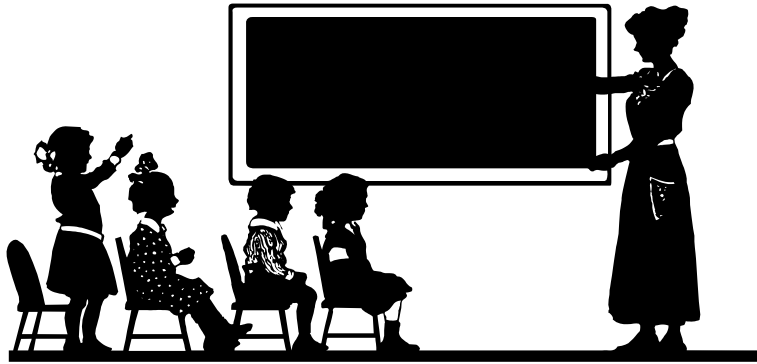
All paraeducators should have the opportunity to participate in professional development activities and/or inservices at the building and district level. When administrative units or other facilities offer inservice opportunities during school time or on regularly scheduled staff development days, paraeducators should be included. In addition, a paraeducator who is employed in a setting requiring special knowledge of content, technology, growth and development, specific disabilities, or other topics, should have the prospect of attending classes, taking university courses, or participating in a mentor program.

Paraeducators can work with their supervisors in the design of an individualized professional development plan. Using performance feedback and self-assessment, along with the results of any inventories of current competencies, the paraeducator plans to undertake activities for professional growth in both those functions essential to her/his job performance and in other areas of interest. The professional development plan is reviewed and updated regularly. Additional information regarding professional development plans is included in Chapter ?.

- **Demonstrates awareness of state and federal legislation pertaining to general and special education.**

Paraeducators, particularly those employed in special education, ELL, or bilingual programs or in Title I schools, should be acquainted with the general provisions of state and federal laws applicable to their students and programs. Examples of federal legislation of which paraeducators should have a working knowledge are: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act; the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA); and the Family Rights and Privacy Act (FRPA). Paraeducators should understand the purpose of an IEP and the implementation of the portions applicable to her/his assignment. Contingent on the assignment, paraeducators might need to understand the requirements and paperwork necessary for Title I and be able to maintain the appropriate documentation.

Understanding state legislation, rules and regulations, and guidelines relevant to a paraeducator's assignment is also important. As an example, a paraeducator engaged in the management of behaviors should understand the applicable rules, regulations, and procedural safeguards. In Colorado, these include such topics as Rules for Restraint and Guidelines for the Use of Time-Out, both of which are available from the Colorado Department of Education Special Education Services Unit.



- **Instructional Content and Practice**

An educator's primary role is instruction. A paraeducator's primary role is to assist in instruction. Educators have the benefit of extensive preparation programs to guide them in such tasks as curriculum development, designing classroom management programs, providing services to students of diverse backgrounds and to those with special needs, and maintaining learner-centered, supportive environments. Many paraeducators have limited preparation, yet they have many responsibilities in support of classroom management, daily instruction, and developing or adapting materials.

Minimum Competencies

- **Demonstrates an awareness of a variety of instructional strategies and materials.**

Although the responsibility for planning the instructional program lies with the licensed educator, it is often the role of the paraeducator to conduct or support instructional activities. Paraeducators should be aware of the distinctions among the purposes and nature of individual, small group, and large group instruction. Depending on the specific setting in which the paraeducator works, s/he may need to be aware of instructional techniques employed in vocational skills, life skills, or community based programs.

Paraeducators should have a basic understanding of learning styles, skill generalization, and the process by which students learn. They should be familiar with the variety of materials used in their classrooms, particular instructional strategies that the licensed educator employs, and strategies for the inclusion of all students in the learning environment.

Peer tutoring and cooperative learning are two of the instructional models in which paraeducators often play a pivotal role. In such efforts, it is essential that paraeducators understand the difference between conducting instruction and facilitating instruction. They may be asked, for example to facilitate or model interactions between students,

assist in educating peer tutors about an instructional strategy, or to provide structure, clarification, and feedback to peer tutors or cooperative learning groups. They should understand when and how to monitor learning groups, to intervene, and to assist with lesson summary.

- **Demonstrates sensitivity to the beliefs, traditions, and values across cultures.**

It is important that the paraeducator recognize and understand cultural differences in beliefs, traditions, and values, especially as they apply to the students with whom he/she is engaged. Just as the school's attitude toward diversity will affect the success of culturally diverse students, so will the paraeducator's interactions with them.

Paraeducators should be able to identify, understand, and acknowledge in a positive manner cultural differences. They need to model and foster cross-cultural understanding and to work toward effective communication across cultures. Language differences may pose obstacles for both students and educators. Paraeducators should work closely with the licensed educator to understand the impact of culture on learning.

- **Understands how culture affects relationships among children, families, and schooling.**

Learning and the value placed on school are greatly impacted by a child's background. The religious beliefs of a family may affect a child's participation in certain school activities, as may cultural or ethnic values. In some cases, a child's parents may not have had formal education, leading to an increased (or decreased) emphasis on its importance. For example, some children may miss school because they are needed to care for younger siblings, particularly in a family that places little value on schooling. A paraeducator's understanding of such cultural mores, will help her/him communicate with the family and with the licensed educator about the student's needs.

As a paraeducator builds relationships with his/her students, understanding cultural values can result in more relevant lessons. Paraeducators should be able to make use of examples in the classroom that honor various cultures, customs, rituals, and values. Their contact with families may serve to strengthen parental support for children's learning experiences.

- **Understands the similarities and differences among the cognitive, communicative, physical, social, and emotional needs of individuals with and without exceptional learning needs.**

A paraeducator needs to have a thorough understanding of the developmental levels of the students with whom he/she is working. An overall, basic knowledge of growth and development is helpful to anyone providing services to children, including paraeducators. They should be aware of patterns of human development, milestones typically achieved at different ages and stages, and risk factors that prohibit or impede typical development. An acquaintance with some of the theoretical underpinnings of human development is important.

The paraeducator employed in a special education programs needs to recognize that, although students with and without disabilities are more alike than different, there are some crucial aspects of cognitive, physical or social/emotional development which may be delayed. The paraeducator should also have at least some knowledge of the specific characteristics of particular disabilities such as attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities, speech-language impairments, autism, emotional disturbance, and/or traumatic brain injury and their impact on development. Those paraeducators working with students with hearing, visual or health impairments need to be aware of the developmental delays or differences concomitant to those conditions.

- **Uses positive, effective, basic strategies for the management of behavior.**

Paraeducators are frequently asked to assist in the general management of the classroom as well as in the management of individual student behavior. In all cases, the supervisor should fully explain the behavior support plan in use, any specific behavior management techniques and strategies to be employed, and the rationale for the choice of behavior supports.

Paraeducators should have a working knowledge of commonly used behavioral strategies such as positive reinforcement, modeling appropriate behaviors, using proximity management, and the appropriate use of time-out. They should be aware of any building or district guidelines around behavior management or discipline. If a paraeducator is asked to assist by observing and recording information about student behavior and performance, s/he should have a clear understanding of the procedures to be followed and the instruments used.

Recommended Practice

In addition to the minimum competencies described above, there are other competencies that paraeducators should acquire and maintain as they become more experienced and as they have additional opportunities for professional growth.

- **Utilizes a variety of instructional strategies and materials, including technology, that respect individual differences.**

Paraeducators should be responsive to students' differences including communication styles, aptitude, and learning styles. They should understand the use of a variety of learning activities which honor and respect differences in ability, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, race, and motivation. Paraeducators should be able to incorporate learning experiences that take into account affective development, the enhancement of self-esteem, and students' differing rates in achieving mastery of a skill.

- **Demonstrates an awareness of content standards, the CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program), and the CSAP-A (Alternate).**

Colorado paraeducators should be familiar with the Colorado Content Standards in all of the relevant subject areas, especially in the areas of reading, writing, and math. They should be aware of the rationale for and use of the content standards, as well as suggested grade level expectations. While it is the licensed educator's responsibility to implement curriculum that assures acquisition of the standards, the paraeducator plays a vital role in supporting the curricular expectations and accommodations.

Similarly, the paraeducator needs a basic understanding of the CSAP tests, of the underlying principles for their use, and of the meaning and use of scores. It is helpful if paraeducators, particularly those working in special education programs, have an awareness of the CSAP-A (Alternate) and recognize the circumstances in which its use is appropriate. Paraeducators may be asked to carry out instructional accommodations for some students who will require accommodations on the CSAP. In these cases, it is the job of the licensed educator to explain the necessity for the accommodations.

- **Uses proactive strategies for prevention and intervention of problem behavior including crisis intervention strategies.**

In addition to basic behavior management strategies described above, the experienced paraeducator will recognize the importance of consistency in managing behavior and will anticipate situations in which a student might behave unacceptably. Paying attention to students as individuals, supporting them in the self-monitoring of their own behavior, and knowing how to intervene in pre-crisis situations are skills that the practiced paraeducator will acquire.

- **Understands ethical considerations inherent in the development of a functional assessment of behavior.**

Although the paraeducator will not complete the functional behavioral assessment her/himself, it is important that he/she understand the components of the FBA and the ethical considerations therein. The purpose of a functional behavioral assessment is to understand why a student is behaving in a particular way, that is, to understand the function or purpose served by challenging behavior, and to identify more appropriate behaviors which will provide the student with the same outcome.

The paraeducator may be asked to assist with the functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral support plan in such ways as data recording or collection, conducting interviews with the student or family, monitoring challenging behaviors and interventions, or teaching replacement behaviors. In all cases, it is crucial that the paraeducator maintain confidentiality, clearly communicate with the licensed professional regarding expectations, and refrain from discussing the FBA with those outside the team unless specifically requested to do so by the supervisor.

- **Articulates goals and objectives for an individual student and describes how educational activities support goals and objectives.**

Whether engaged in a general or special education classroom, the paraeducator needs to have a clear understanding of the goals and objectives for each student. In the majority of general education classrooms, teachers will have some overarching academic and behavioral goals applicable to every student in the class. It is vital that the paraeducator, as a contributing member of the education team, be aware of those goals and be able to articulate how the classroom activities support them.

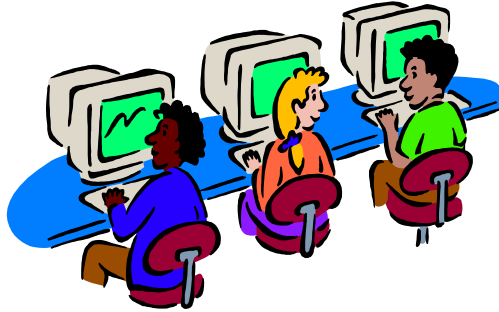
When working with students on IEPs, the paraeducator should have a working knowledge of the child's current level of functioning as described on the IEP, the measurable goals and objectives or benchmarks, the way in which programs will be measured and reported, and the transition plan if applicable. The paraeducator should be able to see and describe a clear relationship between the student's goals and the educational activities used to acquire and maintain them.

- **Adapts instruction to individual student needs.**

Although the paraeducator will not be responsible for designing accommodations and adaptations for students, it is important for her/him to understand that such modifications and adaptive strategies might be used. When assigned to do so by the licensed professional, the paraeducator may be responsible for such adaptations as changing the format of an assignment, using a variety of multi-media, altering the schedule, or changing the mode of input/output for a particular lesson.

Additionally, paraeducators should be able to recognize and implement adaptive environmental, organizational, curricular, and pedagogical strategies. When working

with students with disabilities in the inclusive general classroom, the paraeducator will need to be particularly aware of specific adaptations that might be used in instruction, response, or testing situations.



- **Supporting the Learning Environment**

The duties of the paraeducator are both instructional and non-instructional in nature. The contributions that paraeducators make in helping students meet challenging standards are significant. By supporting the learning environment, paraeducators are supporting student success and helping to circumvent preventable failures.

Minimum Competencies

- **Demonstrates an awareness of a variety of the environmental factors that affect teaching and learning, including health and safety issues.**

Paraeducators need an understanding of factors intrinsic to the classroom environment that have an impact on learning. It is easy to overlook such things as seating arrangements, temperature, lighting, time allotted for assignments and organization of the classroom when considering students' learning. Nevertheless, they are critical features of every classroom. Other, extrinsic, environmental factors such as hazards in the community, conditions in the home, family practices, the setting in which the school is situated, and the socio-economic level of the students also need to be considered. It is important that paraeducators compile a list of such factors and be cognizant of their impact.

- **Understands health and safety issues as they related to learning.**

Paraeducators should be aware of and understand the kinds of health and safety factors affecting learning. Such issues as substance abuse, the prevalence of certain diseases, school violence, harsh and ineffective parental discipline and/or home life, and child abuse and neglect all have a negative effect on students' ability to learn. Communities that fail to prevent antisocial lifestyles or that lack features for the prevention of violence and aggression often have schools that fail to identify students-at-risk.

Conversely, communities and schools that prevent patterns of violent behavior, that foster resiliency, that engage in integrative, proactive instructional models, are often

successful in promoting healthy, safe, and civil learning environments. Particularly because paraeducators are usually members of the community in which the school exists, it is vital that they understand these circumstances.

- **Prepares and organizes materials for instructional and other activities.**

Most often the teacher or other licensed professional will let the paraeducator know what is required for the upcoming lesson. Paraeducators should have a working knowledge of the content and the flow of the lesson in order to best prepare and organize any materials. For example, the paraeducator should know whether the materials will be used to assess prerequisite skills, to present new material, to provide guided or independent practice, or to review previously acquired information.

- **Records information completely and accurately.**

A paraeducator is frequently asked to assist in data collection, the recording and documentation of information. Such documentation can range from keeping attendance records, to recording grades, to tallying behavior incidents, to observing students in a variety of settings and noting their activities. In every case, the accuracy of information is important. The paraeducator should be able to make and document observations appropriate to individuals with specific learning needs and should be able to provide that documentation to other professionals.

If specific instruments or forms are used for recording information, the paraeducator should be thoroughly familiar with the forms and their use. Such instruments as scatter plots, homework charts, reading inventories, and grade sheets might be used in any classroom. Additionally, paraeducators working in inclusive classrooms might be called upon to complete learning inventories, interview questionnaires, IEP documentation, behavior scales and other appropriate forms.

- **Demonstrates awareness of the demands and expectations of various learning environments.**
- **Demonstrates an awareness of the tools of assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation used in schools.**

Paraeducators are not trained to administer assessments or diagnostic tests and should not be put in the position of doing so. However, it is helpful to the para's understanding of the educational program if he/she is familiar with the variety of tools used. The licensed educator should explain the use, purpose, and meaning of any assessments or diagnostic instruments used in the classroom. The CSAP and CSAP-A, the Woodstock Johnson III, reading inventories, and functional behavioral assessment tools are just a few examples of tools that paraeducators might encounter.

Recommended Practice

In addition to the minimum competencies described above, there are others that paraeducators should acquire and maintain as they become more experienced and as they have additional opportunities for professional growth.

- **Uses a variety of data collection tools to document observations of students.**
- **Contributes to the development of students' goals and objectives.**

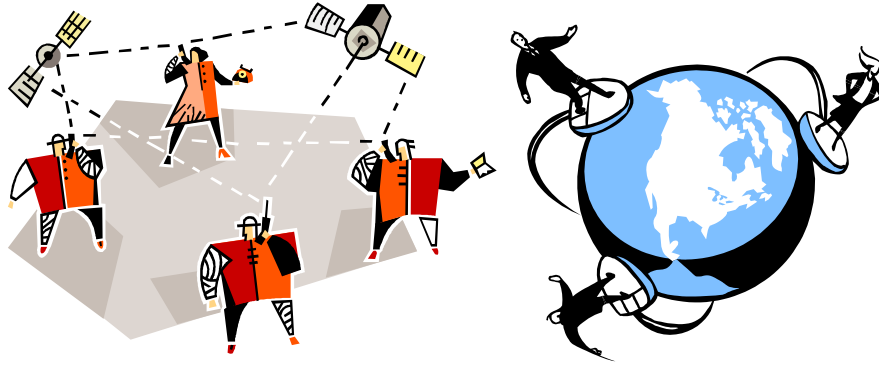
Frequently a paraeducator is in the position of seeing students in situations that the licensed educators on the team have limited opportunity to observe. Paraeducators are often integrally involved in settings such as the playground, the cafeteria, and the school bus. The information that the paraeducators can offer the team about the student's performance in these settings and events is an important contribution as students' goals are developed.

Because a paraeducator is regularly involved in small group instruction with students, he/she may have a different perspective of a student's abilities or needs. It is important that the paraeducator share his/her perspective with the education team as such insights can inform the goal setting process.

- **Participates in team conferences focused on student achievement.**

As a valued member of the education team, the paraeducator should be involved in conferences or, when appropriate, IEP meetings about specific students and their progress. When engaged in team conference, the paraeducator should recall and use the collaborative principles that the team has agreed upon.

Paraeducators should focus on communicating clearly, listening for understanding, sharing information appropriately, committing to the team process, maintaining confidentiality, and participating in collaborative problem-solving or planning activities.



- **Communication and Collaborative Partnerships**

In addition to the minimum competencies described above, there are others that paraeducators should acquire and maintain as they become more experienced and as they have additional opportunities for professional growth.

Minimum Competencies

- **Uses language and actions that maintain and respect the dignity and rights of students.**
- **Demonstrates sensitivity to diversity in cultural heritage, life styles, and value systems.**
- **Communicates thoughts, ideas, information and messages clearly through speech and writing according to the conventions of standard English/sign/or other language of instruction.**
- **Establishes and maintains rapport with students and all members of the education team.**

Recommended Practice

- **Demonstrates effective problem-solving, flexible thinking, and conflict management skills.**
- **Analyzes one's own personal strengths and preferences to effectively participate on an educational team.**